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Explore the Mundane! - The Boring Conference 2018

In his 1998 book *The Mezzanine* ('novel' isn't really the right word), Nicholson Baker took the events of a particularly uneventful lunch break, and used them as a starting point for a series of meditations on apparently trivial questions – the physics of shoelace tying, the logistics and technique of the paper straw – that turned out to have significant implications. The conclusion was simple – anything is worth considering if you look at it deeply enough.

Something of the same spirit motivates the Boring Conference, which takes place every May at Conway Hall in London, and which is described by its founder, James Ward, as 'a celebration of the mundane, the ordinary, the obvious, and the overlooked'. You can get a flavour of it on the Boring podcast, downloadable on <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p05t3gr2/episodes/downloads>, or at a spin-off event like the Boring talks at the British Library on June 26 (<https://www.bl.uk/events/boring-talks-june-2018>).

The day consists of a series of talks, covering subjects that over the conference's eight years have included wooden pallets, the history of the double yellow line, the noises made by vending machines, the menus of chain restaurants, the word 'the', and the multi-lingual safety warnings that accompany Kinder eggs.

Speakers come from a variety of backgrounds, though a disproportionate number seem to be academics, exploring an obscure side alley leading away from their central area. One of this year's speakers, seaside historian Dr. Kathryn Ferry (and incidentally, isn't that a great job to have?), prefaced her talk, on those toilet roll covers shaped like ladies in crinolines, by saying 'I've wanted to talk about this for years, and this conference is possibly the only chance I'll get.' (She was also one of two speakers, both women, to mention the difficulties that their spouses had in coping with their enthusiasms.)

As well as the crinoline ladies, subjects this year included the eighteen-minute gap on Nixon's Watergate tapes (which apparently you can listen to in its entirety at the Richard M. Nixon memorial library), call centres, the aesthetics of wall stains, Hook, an unbuilt new town in Hampshire, and the phenomenon of insects caught on CCTV (in a talk by Hayley Stevens, a professional ghost debunker).

One paper arguably went against the ethos of the conference by being interesting on the surface as well as underneath, Giles Rhys Jones spoke on What3words, a worldwide scheme to improve international addresses by dividing the world into three-metre squares, all referred to by a three word combination. (You can find your location at the website <https://what3words.com> – I'm currently writing this at struck.trio.organs) This turns out to have considerable applications for industry and aid, particularly in parts of the world where people don't necessarily have street addresses.

However, for the most part, the appeal of the day is in the disjunction between the subjects' ostensible blandness and how interesting they turn out to be – the

alchemy that produces gold from apparently base (or at least dull) material. In this respect, the day is a celebration of the interconnectedness of things – every subject, if looked at properly, yields a little insight into a larger issue. The popularity of crinoline ladies on toilet roll covers is a hangover from their wider currency in the interwar years, which is itself a product of Regency nostalgia in that period (hence, incidentally, the introduction of Quality Street chocolates in 1936). While we're talking about confectionary, Kinder eggs' multi-lingual warnings turn out to give an insight into how businesses deal with international tensions. The languages used include Arabic but not Hebrew; the Arab world won't accept goods with that language on, while Israel won't accept anything with Arabic. As the former is the larger market, it makes more economic sense to include Arabic in the standard rubric, and print a special set of instructions for Israel.

Similarly, and maybe more significantly, the wooden pallet turns out to be, as its advocate Liam Shaw points out, the 'single most important object in the global economy'. Their internationally standardised design means that importers don't have to wait for their goods to be unloaded, but can just take away the same number of pallets that they brought, which makes cross-border trade much more efficient. Because they're made of wood, and therefore potentially disease-carrying, they have to be subject to stringent health procedures, again dependent on a complex web of international agreements. The pallet stacks up as a symbol for the Boring conference itself – uninteresting in itself, it turns out to be one of the things that make international trade possible, ignored but crucial.

If pallets are a symbol of connectivity, Alex Baxevenis' 'Doormats: a Comparative Study' (available to read on <https://medium.com/@futureshape/doormats-a-comparative-study-8108abe38799>) dealt with a subject that is, in the most literal sense of the word, liminal. It arose from an incident when he got off on the wrong floor at his block, only realising when he got to what he'd thought to be his flat, and realised that it had a doormat, which his flat doesn't. This inspired him to study the demographics and style of the doormats in his building. Roughly fifty per cent of the flats had doormats; some were blank, some had geometric designs, some pictorial (mostly of rural subjects) and some text. He found three cases of duplicate doormats, including two flats that had a Star Wars 'Welcome to the Dark Side' mat, one facing towards the flat, one facing away, which makes you wonder about the residents' different views of the world, and themselves. He ended with an exhortation that epitomised the philosophy of his talk, and of the conference itself:

'Think of all the things and places that are so close to you but you know nothing about.

One day, on purpose, take a wrong turn. Get off at the wrong bus stop. Get off the lift at the wrong floor.

Look at what's there, and it might inspire you.

Go forth, and explore the mundane!